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THE QUEEN OF THE GNOMES.

BY ALAN DALE.

Nobody would ever have imagined that Peggy Leamington had a will of her own, or that she was anything but a charming little atom of the feminine flotsam and jetsam cast by the relentless sea of circumstances upon the barren shore of existence. Her mouth was irresolute, her eyes anything but determined-looking, yet in Peggy's case appearances were decidedly deceptive. She had an undeniable will of her own, luckily for her and for the querulous old mother dependent upon her exertions.

Poor Peggy's life had been one tumultuous struggle ever since her father died. He had left his wife and daughter penniless; and even that was not the full extent of their discomfort. Mrs. Leamington felt that she had appearances—the bane of existence—to keep up; in fact, she was perfectly willing to live in threadbare uneasiness, if she could only succeed in convincing the world that she was basking in the comparative sun of luxury. Peggy would have preferred a little more of the sun for herself and a little less for the unsympathetic outsiders, who cared not a penny whether she lived or died. But she succumbed obediently to the maternal idea.

Peggy had sewed industriously night and day for a large wholesale shop that paid her but a miserable pittance, yet afforded her the means of keeping from the door the wolf—that terrible black master—the cruel extorter of so much blood-money. Mrs. Leamington saw her little flat ever bright and pretty; she ate many a luxury that Peggy pathetically pretended she herself didn't like, there not being enough to "go round." Her life was as free from care as an unselfish little daughter could make it.

Then, there was Jack—Jack Ruffington. Since he had come into Peggy's life things had been much more endurable. He had met the little lady at the house of one of her old school friends, and Peggy's flaxen locks and azure eyes had charmed the susceptible young man. He didn't think he was susceptible, however. No man does. Peggy, with as much dignity as nineteen Summers could command, had asked him to call and see mamma.

"I am sure you would like her," she said, after she had met Mr. Ruffington several times at this accommodating friend's house. Then she added, wickedly, "You can come and see her often, you know—when I'm out."

Peggy did have many opportunities to indulge in those little harmless coquetries so necessary to many women. Stern realities claimed her almost entirely. The butterfly beauties of life seemed to have flitted past her. Cold, solid facts remained. Try and be coquettish, young women, in the presence of these facts, if you can. Jack Ruffington called at Mrs. Leamington's modest apartments. He called once reluctantly; then again, with less timidity; finally he spent his almost every evening there, and seemed to enjoy it, too. There is no use beating about the bush and pretending that it was Mrs. Leamington's brilliant conversation that enchanted him. That would be absurd for two reasons. First, because the poor old lady when she spoke at all she talked of nothing but the better days she had once known, and, second, because she was generally impolite enough to sleep long before Mr. Ruffington took his departure. Peggy was the attraction. She listened to all Jack's stories, sympathized with his plans for the future, and while she plied her needle and stitched away for dear life and the dear life of her mother, gave him the benefit of her girlish advice. Those were delightful evenings. The stuffy little flat was a far-extending paradise; the dreamy little clock a cruel, inconsiderate time-slayer.

Then the night came when Jack asked Peggy to be his wife, and she in her enthusiasm utterly ruined a dainty lace ruffle that she had been manipulating.

"You must wait for me, Peggy," he said, looking at her blushing-coy face. "The governor has promised to raise me as soon as ever I step into Smith's place, and then, Peggy—we'll have a flat larger than this, and your mother shall live with us—and—and—oh, Peggy, shall we not be happy!"

Peggy actually shed tears of joy as she looked upon the glowing picture painted by the anticipative imagination of Mr. Ruffington. Might he exact a lover's privilege and take a kiss? Peggy crimsoned at the question, but nevertheless held up her face at a very kissable distance, and Mr. Jack made not the least ceremony. Two days later an unpretentious little engagement ring encircled Miss Leamington's pretty finger.

The girl sat thinking of all these pleasant moments one cold, dark afternoon when the days had slipped away from Autumn and were speeding winterward as rapidly as possible. Since her engagement nothing but ill luck seemed to have fallen to her lot. The very next day she had received a letter from her employers at the large wholesale shop that had kept her supplied with work. Business was very bad, said the letter, and orders had been given to reduce expenses. Perhaps at some future time the services of Miss Leamington might be needed, but at present——

It was hard, very hard. Peggy felt completely dazed. What could she do? She could not remain more than a fortnight without work. If she did, the small hoard of savings that she kept as an emergency fund would be exhausted.

She trotted patiently downtown and visited each of the big stores, determined to obtain work by some means. But the polite answer she received on all sides rendered argument impossible. She had thought of making some sort of desperate appeal to these frigid autocrats. But once in their presence and she found it impossible. Reasoning was out of the question.

"Leave your address" was the only balm volunteered, and what balm that is to the work-seeker!

On her way home from this discouraging quest, her eyes were attracted by a glaring poster, fitfully lighted by a neighboring lamp. In big blue letters the announcement was made that a glittering spectacle would shortly be presented at Niblo's Garden, with "bevies of beautiful girls and hundreds of stalwart men." A sudden inspiration came to Peggy. She had been to the theatre but twice in her life and knew very little about it, but she had seen girls much uglier than she was joining in stage crowds and playing small, unimportant parts. If only she could get a chance in one of the "bevies of beautiful girls!" It would pay her better than the sewing and it would be a pleasant change. Without giving herself time for reflection she went there and then to the stage door of the big theatre and asked to see the manager of the company that was to give the production.

He came to her and she did not faint when he appeared. On the contrary, she was very much on the alert and answered all questions with a self-assurance that evidently pleased the gentleman who put them.

He apparently liked her appearance, and he smiled with a sort of gratitude when she said she couldn't act, and wasn't at all accomplished, because managers very rarely meet that kind of person. Applicants for positions on the stage are nearly always the greatest people on earth—in their own estimation.

"I will give you a chance, young lady," he said at last, "and will cast you for a small part called the Queen of the Gnomes. You have but a few lines to speak, and have finished at the end of the second act, when you can go home to your mother."

For Peggy had told this kindly-looking manager everything. She was delighted at her luck and went home "on air." It was not till later, when her mother had fallen asleep over her knitting, that Peggy began to feel a little doubtful. She would not dare to tell Mrs. Leamington what she was going to do. The old lady had a perfect horror of theatres, and, after all, Peggy reflected, it would not be necessary to divulge her secret. She could look for work in the shops every day, and then when she found it she could resign from her queenship of the gnomes. It was absolutely necessary that she earn money. Starvation stared them in the face without it.

And Jack—no, she could not tell Jack. Mr. Ruffington would certainly not care to imagine that his affianced wife was every evening a queen of the gnomes for the benefit of a critical public. Poor Peggy! She rebelled at the idea of deception. It is easy to be frank and straightforward when there is no reason why you should be otherwise. One thing she remembered with joy. Jack was obliged to work every night now. He would not miss her. They could spend their Sundays together just the same as ever. So Peggy went to rehearsal, and was pronounced entirely competent. The work was very distasteful to her; the people with whom she came in contact disgusted her. But she associated with them as little as possible, and was careful to avoid giving offense. There is a great deal of nonsense talked about contamination. But a man or woman truly refined is in no danger of being contaminated, no matter what the surroundings.

Peggy's trials began during the first week. The King of the Gnomes persisted in persecuting her with attentions. He was a very objectionable creature, and she tried hard to let him see that she thought so. She longed to confide in Jack—dear, old Jack, but there she was without a soul in the world to whom she could tell her troubles. In her principal scene with the King of the Gnomes she had to tear from his face a black veil which he wore, and manifest astonishment at his features which she was supposed never to have seen before, having married him by some weird rite. The King always seized this opportunity to smile sweetly, and to press her hand as affectionately as possible.

One night as she reached her home, she was going to her room, tired and discouraged, when, standing in the parlor, with an angry pallor on his face, she saw Jack. In an agony of apprehension she tried to mentally formulate some excuses for her absence before she went to him, but he gave her no time. He rushed to meet her and drew her into the room.

"Peggy," he said, his eyes big with reproach, "you out alone at this time of night! Where have you been?"

Peggy was silent. Her load of woe seemed really greater than she could bear.

"I asked your mother," Jack went on, looking into her tear-dimmed eyes, "and she told me that you were out every night now, working. Is that true?"

"Jack"—Peggy gulped down a big sob—"how do you think we should live if I didn't work? Do you suppose we have an income or—or—that it—it rains money?"

"No dear," he said, tenderly stroking the smooth little head, and the light of deepest compassion in his eyes—which she couldn't see. "I know you go to work, but I do not believe that you still do the sewing as your mother thinks. Am I right?"

Peggy moved away from him, indignant.

"I refuse to answer," she declared. "You have no right to question me. I am old enough to do as I think best. When I am your wife you can command me, but until then—no."

"Won't you trust me, Peggy?"—very diffidently.

"I cannot—just yet."

Peggy cried bitterly when Jack had gone. Of course, he had the right to question her, but she resented his interference. Then she was afraid of his anger when he learned what she was doing. But men were so inconsiderate, she thought. They would sooner hear of a woman starving than working for her livelihood. If Peggy had applied to Jack he might have helped her, but the independent little lady would have cut out her tongue rather than apply to the young man.

The idea of work next night sickened her. She went to the theatre depressed and ill. Queen of the Gnomes! How utterly silly the term queen sounded applied to herself. She felt she was the most inferior gnome in the gathering. Then the thought of meeting the King face to face again! How horrible it was! Was life always to be as dark and unpleasant as it seemed just now? Peggy donned her black goblin attire with the strongest inclination she had ever felt to tear it to pieces. She was thankful that she had not been called upon to be one of the smiling, radiant fairies. She could not have smiled upon this occasion.

The curtain rose upon the dark, subterranean cavern where the gnomes pirouetted and whirled. Peggy went through her evolutions in a dream. She was thinking of Jack all the time. If only she had told him what she was doing! She would have felt more at her ease, at any rate. This weight on the conscience was killing her. She would tell him to-morrow. Further concealment was utterly impossible.

She felt better after she had come to this determination and nerved herself for her work in the second act, when she had to meet the King of the Gnomes. She had not seen him behind the scenes at all to-night. Usually he was a most determined lounger, although he was not obliged to appear until the second act.

Ah! There he was. As she saw him approaching she turned away in an irrepressible ecstasy of repulsion. He did not attempt to come near her, strange to say. He stood at one wing while she waited at the other. A feeling of gratitude took possession of her. Perhaps he intended to cease his persecution after all.

Five minutes later and she was upon the stage, and the time for the unveiling of the King had arrived. Peggy trembled at the idea of again suffering this wretch's brutal smile, of feeling his hated arms around her waist. Well, she reflected, it could not be helped. She must be patient. After this week she would submit to such indignity no longer.

With an effort she tore from his head the veil, and then recoiled without looking into his face. The dreaded moment was at hand. His arm was around her waist. He was unnecessarily close. It was horrible. It was ——

In a frenzy of wrath she looked up, words of burning indignation on her lips. They were never uttered. The color fled from her cheeks; her eyes were rounded with a vast suprise; her breath came and went most alarmingly; she would have fallen but that the King held her firmly and masterfully in his arms.

And in this King she recognized her own Jack Ruffington.

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"How did you manage it, Jack?" asked Peggy, excitedly, as they were in the street, on their way home.

Jack laughed. "Dearest girl," he said, "did you imagine that you could have done anything for any length of time without my knowing it? A week ago I called at your house and found you out. I made your mother promise not to tell you of my visit. Next night I discovered what you were doing—no matter how. Last night I gave you an opportunity to confide in me. No, you were too self-willed. So I puzzled the thing over, and finally decided upon this scheme. I knew the stage manager of the company, and also the manager. It appears that the fellow who has played the King of the Gnomes left suddenly after last night's performance. They have engaged somebody for Monday. I persuaded them to let me go on to-night."

"Oh, Jack!" exclaimed Peggy. She could say nothing more.

"Well, Miss Leamington."

"Will you ever forgive me, Jack, for my deception. I am very awful, I know; but, but—oh! I had to do it!"

Mr. Ruffington put his hand into his pocket, and pulled out an envelope. From this he extracted something that looked like a check, and presented it to Peggy.

"That," he said, "is a receipt for one month's rent in advance of a lovely little flat in Harlem, beginning from the 1st of next month. I've been 'raised,' Peggy, and—and"——

"What, Jack, dear?" asked Peggy, innocently.

"Can't you guess?"—bashfully.

"You've been 'raised' you tell me, and you show me the receipt for the rent of a flat. I suppose you are going to live there. That is it, isn't it, Jack?" (All this with the most bewildering unconsciousness.)

"Yes, I'm going to live there, Peggy," said Jack, "with you as my wife, if you will."

Then, although they were in the street, he gave her a tender, unmistakable kiss—a most disgraceful proceeding—and she, a willing accomplice, raised not the least objection. Luckily it was very dark and the neighborhood was deserted.

"You haven't given me my answer," said Jack at last.

"Well," declared Miss Leamington, "as you have secured the flat and paid the rent in advance, I don't really see why you can't take my answer for granted. But for the sake of formality, Jack, I will say yes. I should not like your plans to be spoiled by such a trifle as—as a wife."

ALAN DALE.

Not Very Flattering.

[From the Detroit Free Press.]

"Mighty fine woman I saw you lifting your hat to back there, old boy."

"Yes, rather."

"Some maah of yours?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't introduce a fellow, eh?"

"Might, if you'll come up to the house some evening."

"Oh! your wife?"

"Yes."

"Pshaw! I supposed it was your cook."

Cause of the Complaint.

[From Judge.]

"When a man gets more than he thought he was getting in a horse trade he ought not to kick, had he?"

"Well, I should say not."

"Gimlet bought an animal from me last week and now he is furious."

"You don't mean to say he got more than he asked for?"

"Yes; but only two spavins."

SKETCHES OF NEW YORK LIFE

PEN PICTURES DRAWN BY EVENING WORLD REPORTERS.

You Can Pay for Your Funeral Now Before You Are Dead.

A novel idea in the way of paying one's funeral expenses has been introduced by a company recently organized for the purpose of furnishing cheap funerals.

The new method consists of paying for your funeral in advance. Thus a man is enabled to decide just what kind of a funeral he is going to have, and he will also know what it costs.

The trade is done mostly among the poorer classes, and the average funeral, paid for in advance, costs about $50.

According to the plan, a man can make small payments, of $5 per month, until the full amount is paid.

And then, if he is taken sick, he can die happy in the knowledge that his taking off isn't going to pinch the pocketbook of any of his friends.

If, however, he should happen to die before the full amount is paid, his nearest relative has to give a bond, or guarantee that the full amount that the contract calls for will be paid.

If, after paying the full amount, the patron should live for many years, the Company would be away ahead on the deal, by reason of the interest that would accumulate on the original $50 invested.

Women at an Auction Sale of Pawnbrokers' Unredeemed Pledges.

In a dimly lighted, narrow store on the east side a crowd of perhaps a hundred people were gathered. Fully five-sixths of them were women, and they were squatted down on the floor. Each one carried a large basket, and many of them were half filled with torn and soiled clothing. A man stood up on a platform wildly waving his hands and calling out for bids on the article which he held in his hand.

It was a pawnbroker's auction sale.

Articles were being sold for almost nothing. Wearing apparel that had cost heavy prices when purchased new were sold for a mere nothing. It was a common thing to hear fancy skirts sold for 15, 20 and 30 cents.

The auctioneer didn't waste any time, either. When he offered an article he got a bid, and unless he received another bid immediately he knocked it down.

"It only shows," said a policeman, "how much poor people are able to borrow on a thing, when you see such articles sold for a few cents."

Scenes at Fulton Ferry Fish Market on a Friday Morning.

A sight that is often overlooked by visitors to this city is the wholesale fish market at Fulton ferry.

The best time to see it, according to what the dealers say, is early on Friday morning, as on that day the largest business of the week is transacted, and from an early hour in the morning until 9 or 10 o'clock the market is just crowded.

People of all classes meet there. The patrons are not confined to one class, but embrace fishmongers from all sections.

The high-toned dealer from the aristocratic precincts of Madison avenue rubs elbows with the poor peddler of Hester street, whose stock is shoved about in a broken push-cart.

Millions of pounds of fish go out from this market annually, and there is probably more excitement here on Friday morning than in any other market in the country.

MIRTH FROM HUMOR'S CUP.

SOME MERRY DRIPPINGS OF FUN FROM THE FUNNY MEN'S PENS.

Familiar Dry-Goods Sign.

[From Judge.]

"Examine our red came-bricks."

It Hurt His Feelings.

[From the Merchant Traveller.]

Kansas Tramp—Mister, could you do a little something to assist a poor man?

Stranger—You don't look as though you were unable to work. You ought to be ashamed of yourself to go around this way. You are a disgrace to humanity. Why don't you go down to the river and take a bath and try to earn a living?

Kansas Tramp (pathetically)—Take a bath! Ain't it enough to have to drink the stuff?

Won by a Cold Deck.

[From the Epoch.]

First Boy—So your uncle is not dead after all?

Second Boy—No; he was supposed to have died, and they cofined him in the back parlor to be buried to-morrow. Grandpa and pa got drunk and played freeze-out over the corpse, and banged so on the lid that it woke uncle up, who was in a trance, and he raked in the pot before they could get their hair to sit down again.

Two Kinds of Accompaniment.

[From the Pfiegende Blatter.]

Policeman (to street musician)—Have you a permit to play on the streets?

Itinerant Musician—No.

Policeman (making him a prisoner)—Then accompany me.

Itinerant Musician—With the greatest pleasure. What do you wish to sing?

A Sure Sign.

[From Time.]

First Tramp (waking up in a freight car)—What jay town is dis?

Second Tramp—I dunno—see de blackbirds flyin' troo de air.

First Tramp (looking out)—Huh! dem's no blackbirds; dem's cinders—dis is Chicago.

A Blush Absorber.

[From the Detroit Free Press.]

Housewife—Your impudence amazes me. I find fer by your nose that——

Tramp—Ah, madam, you do me great wrong. I do not drink. My nose is simply a blush absorber.

Making a Monkey of Him.

[From Puck.]

De Ruyter—Clara, you've started the fire with one of my MSS.! Pull it out—quick!

His Spouse—Pull it out yourself. I won't be made the catspaw to take your chestnuts out of the fire.

He Had the Brooklyner's Marks.

[From the Epoch.]

Cumso (to new acquaintance)—When did you move from Brooklyn?

New Acquaintance—I never lived in Brooklyn.

Cumso—That's strange. I could almost swear I saw you wheeling a baby carriage last evening.